

CareerSmart Advisor™

Strategies & Solutions for Your Career Success

A Note From Dave

As the Thanksgiving holiday rapidly approaches, it's the perfect time to be thankful for what we have, both in our personal lives as well as our professional ones, while at the same time finding new things for which to be thankful. Despite 2009 being a tough year for many of us, in many ways, we all have hope that 2010 will be better.



The cover story in this issue provides executives with insights on what they need to do right now to finish off 2009 on a high note and what goals they should accomplish by December 31.

I think this is a great starting point for 2010. One way in which we can ensure that next year is better is to accomplish this year's goals and immediately create new ones that will define the business climate in 2010.

If you're currently employed, what goals do you want to accomplish in order to improve the success of your career and your company? Why not spend some time now getting the framework for your latest initiative in place? Do you need to improve your networking skills? Reach out to the individuals who comprise your network. Chances are, these folks will be more receptive and have more time to talk now than during other times of the year. The same holds true if you're currently in job search: Securing face time with hiring managers is a bit easier during this time of year.

Hopefully, the experts featured in our cover story will help motivate you to reach the goals on your personal list. But whatever you do, make sure you make the most of the rest of 2009 to give you a running start at 2010. You'll be thankful that you did!

Sincerely,

Dave

Dave Opton
ExecuNet Founder & CEO
www.execunet.com/davesblog

Accomplishing the Final Goals of 2009

By Marji McClure

As 2009 comes to an end, it's natural for executives to spend the last weeks of the year reflecting on what they've done with their careers and within their organizations as well as what they still want to do. Did they accomplish all of the goals they set for their organization this year? Did they achieve everything they wanted from their careers in 2009? What are some of the most notable accomplishments that will define this year? What hasn't yet been done?

If you haven't yet completed everything that was on your to-do list for 2009, it may not be too late. Experts agree that there is still time to achieve your goals; expectations for such accomplishments may have to be tempered just a bit — but results can still be rather impressive, depending on the goals left to tackle.

Your Job Search Goals

If finding a new position is one of your goals for 2009, experts agree that now is the time to pursue it. Many people choose to put their job search on hold during the holidays, effectively decreasing the number of candidates competing against you in the job market.

During this time of year, job-seeking executives often find it can actually be easier to connect with individuals within organizations since internal operations within most companies tend to slow as the holidays approach.

"Job search never has a holiday," says Andy Borkin, president of Strategic Advancement Inc., a New Jersey-based human resources consulting firm, noting that hiring authorities tend to be more accessible and in a better frame of mind during the holiday season. Since they typically have more time, many hiring managers may be more willing to schedule informational meetings than they typically are during other times of the year.

If organizations have a specific hiring need, they aren't going to wait until January to begin or resume their search for qualified candidates. Regardless of the economy and time of year, companies will continue to hire to fill crucial roles. "People haven't turned off all of their hiring," says Borkin. "Opportunities are starting to increase. If [companies] have needs, they are bringing people in."

Continued on page 4

Executive Toolbox Landing A Board Seat	2
Books Worth Your Time Me 2.0.....	3
Insider Insight How to Effectively Motivate Your Team	6
Your Career Advisor Assessing Risk Along the Career Path	7

Career-Enhancing Programs
December 2009
Hosted by Dave Opton,
founder and CEO, ExecuNet

- 12/3 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — Expert Q&A: Interviewing — Judy Rosemarin
- 12/10 — MarketOne: Winning the High Stakes Game of Landing a Top C-Level Role! — Karen Armon
- 12/11 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — 12 Ways to Jump Start Your Job Search in the New Year — Karen Armon
- 12/17 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — Expert Q&A: Networking — Bill Belknap

Networking Meetings in Your Area
November/December 2009
Hosted by ExecuNet Facilitators

- 11/25 — Toronto — Martin Buckland
- 12/1 — San Diego/Carlsbad — Mark James
- 12/2 — New York City — Judy Rosemarin
- 12/2 — Cincinnati — Jennifer McClure
- 12/2 — New York City Sr. Executive Roundtable — Judy Rosemarin
- 12/3 — Atlanta — J. Patrick Haly
- 12/3 — Southern Wisconsin — Clara Hurd Nydam & Tom Senge
- 12/4 — Rochester/Finger Lakes — Arnie Boldt & Gail Smith Boldt
- 12/7 — Detroit — Marge Larsen
- 12/8 — Orlando — Catherine Coates & Mike Murray
- 12/9 — Stamford — Linda Van Valkenburgh
- 12/9 — Toronto Sr. Executive Roundtable — Martin Buckland
- 12/9 — Philadelphia — Mitch Wienick & Ed Kelleher
- 12/9 — Denver — Karen Armon
- 12/9 — Portland — Jean Erickson Walker
- 12/9 — Cleveland Sr. Executive Roundtable — Rick Taylor
- 12/9 — Philadelphia Sr. Executive Roundtable — Mitch Wienick & Ed Kelleher
- 12/10 — Vienna/Tysons Corner, VA — Peter McCarthy
- 12/10 — Indianapolis — Romona Camarata
- 12/11 — St. Louis — Ken Coleman & Randy Hove
- 12/11 — Parsippany — Linsey Levine
- 12/11 — Buffalo/Niagara — Beth Stefani
- 12/11 — Tampa Bay — Gina Potito
- 12/14 — Miami/Hollywood — Jeannette Kraar
- 12/15 — Vienna/Tysons Corner, VA Sr. Executive Roundtable — Peter McCarthy
- 12/15 — Wilmington — Rick Hays
- 12/15 — Houston — Yolanda Brown
- 12/15 — Irvine (Orange County) — Mark James
- 12/15 — Cleveland — Rick Taylor
- 12/16 — Chicago — Gail Sussman Miller
- 12/16 — Hartford/New Haven — Paul Mathews
- 12/16 — Stamford Sr. Executive Roundtable — Linda Van Valkenburgh
- 12/16 — Raleigh/Durham — Stuart Levine

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Executive Toolbox

Landing A Board Seat

By Patricia H. Lenkov

While the turbulence in the business world continues and there is endless speculation about the presumed failure of many corporate boards, board service is still an excellent opportunity and learning experience that can enhance one's skills, network and knowledge immensely.

So often, I get asked to assist people looking to join their first corporate board. These people are by and large qualified, experienced and credible, yet for the most part, they do not know how they can go about securing that very first board seat. I have summarized the key points that one needs to know in order to achieve that coveted goal:

Be Successful in Your Current Role

Be the best that you can be in your day job. Board directors, by definition, must have achieved some measure of success in their career before they will be considered "board-ready." Therefore, the very best way to position oneself for board service is to focus on succeeding and accomplishing in your chosen career.

Be Your Own Boss

Run a business. Operational experience is still the most desired skill set on any board. This, however is closely followed by financial expertise and one's willingness and qualification to sit on an audit committee. You shouldn't be concerned if neither of these are part of your background, since never before have boards been open to as varied backgrounds and experience as they are today. There is, for example, and for obvious reasons, great interest in risk expertise in the board room right now.

Be Visible

Visibility is important. Being viewed as an expert in your field will put you on many radar screens. Speaking at

conferences, publishing papers, books, articles, etc will raise your visibility and ultimately put you in the purview of those making board election decisions.

Build the Foundation

Start small. Any governance experience is important. Start your director career with a non-profit board, leverage that into a private company and, ultimately, into a small public company. Don't expect to start on a *Fortune* 500 board.

Connect Yourself with the Role

Understand yourself and your motivation. Know what your skills are and why you want to sit on a board. Understand the role of a director and know what is expected in the board room. I always ask potential directors why they want to sit on a board and what they think the role entails, and at times, I am disconcerted by the answers.

Broaden Your Network

Get to know the experts. The obvious people to be acquainted with are recruiters who specialize in boards of directors. But also consider lawyers, CPAs and other business advisors who are often called upon for trusted recommendations by a company CEO or nominating and governance chair.

Conduct Due Diligence

Finally, do your homework. A board director has considerable responsibilities and obligations. Understand how a boardroom functions, how it should function, topical issues in corporate governance and, finally, what qualities all exceptional directors must have. ■

Patricia H. Lenkov is the founder of the executive recruiting firm Agility Executive Search LLC. She previously conducted executive searches with the New York office of Spencer Stuart. She can be contacted at AgilityExecutiveSearch.com or 212-535-2275.

Books Worth Your Time: Q&A with Author Dan Schawbel

Me 2.0

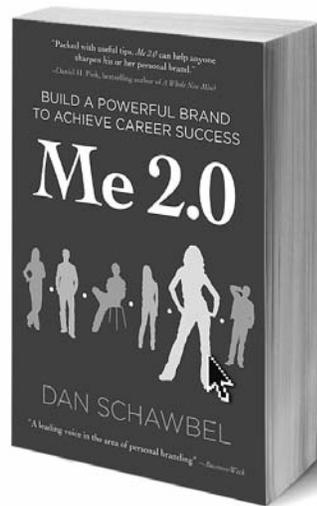
The term may be new, but “personal branding” has been around for decades. Successful people have been clearly displaying their value to the world, maximizing their potential to create better opportunities. Now, in the modern “2.0” world, branding oneself is easier, more affordable and, with the deluge of available executive talent in the job market today, more essential than ever.



To be a brand means to use similar branding strategies that corporations and products use to create an experience — a friendship — with an audience.



In his book, *Me 2.0* [Kaplan, 2009], Dan Schawbel unveils his four-step plan for taking command of one’s brand. He explains how to discover, create, communicate and maintain a personal brand, one that will differentiate you from the crowd. “Personal branding will become the cornerstone of recruitment as the adoption of social media and networks expands. From screening to interviewing and candidate selection, the recruiting process will be controlled by social media and networks, where recruiters can connect with the right candidate to match their open position and engage in virtual conversation,” says Schawbel. He adds that not only will personal branding be a primary recruitment tool in the near future, it is how job seekers can stand out in the crowd *today*. He says, “Traditional résumés don’t differentiate our brands, as they



don’t capitalize on our personalities. Social media will put the personality into résumés.”

In this exclusive interview, ExecuNet Editor Will Flammé asks the author to discuss his views on personal brands.

Q. What is personal branding, and why is it so important for today’s business leaders?

A. Personal branding is how we market ourselves to others. Each and every one of us has a brand because we are constantly being judged based on first impressions. Also, we are forced to sell our ideas and unique abilities to all stakeholders inside a company or as an entrepreneur. Personal branding is critical in a world filled with clutter, competition and ambiguity. To be a brand means to use similar branding strategies that corporations and products use to create an experience — a friendship — with an audience. People trust people and will, therefore, be more inclined to purchase your product or hire you based on their relationship with you or what they hear about you. As a business leader, it’s imperative to have leadership skills that will persuade people to want to work with you. It’s easy for leaders to retain top talent, and the groups they lead can work smarter and faster with strong leadership. In today’s world and working climate, people switch

jobs more than 10 times in their careers, which means business leaders will have to hone their skills and become great communicators in order to sustain their organization. Personal branding is the glue that will attach subordinates to their managers and vice-versa.

Q. What’s the first step toward building one’s personal brand?

A. The first step, out of four, in the personal branding process is “discovery.” In order to really understand who you are and carve out a career path moving forward, investing in self-discovery is critical. In fact, if you don’t spend time learning about yourself, your values, personal mission, and unique attributes, you will be at a disadvantage when marketing your brand to others. Start by removing yourself from distractions and ask yourself, *Who am I?* and *If I could do anything, what would it be?* If you don’t know what your brand is, how are you going to be able to communicate it to someone else? People won’t take you seriously if you act like someone else, instead of using what is unique about you to stand out and shine.

Q. What role do you find personal branding plays in one’s job search?

A. Personal branding is much more than a job search; it’s a way of life. Instead of searching for a job, you should establish your brand on a niche and then attract opportunities directly to you. This reactive approach involves becoming a content producer, not just a consumer, so that you can add to online discussions and pull people directly to your brand (blog or traditional website). In this way, you’ll become known for a specific expertise and when someone is looking for it, if you’ve done the right things, they will become your next employer. A blog, and social network profiles, are filters that pull people who want to hire you closer to you and repel those who aren’t interested, without much energy from the recruiter or applicant point-of-view.

Continued on page 8

Final Goals

Continued from page 1

Addressing Networking, Relationship Goals

Goals related to networking and relationship building are among the most important individual goals executives need to work on as they close out 2009. They're vital if you're currently in job search, but just as important for executives who also use their network for other career development activities, such as forming new business ventures. Plus, you never know when you will need assistance with an unexpected job search. "Build the friendships back and nurture them to where a good support system is once again available in times of crisis," says Dilip Saraf, a career coach and author.

One example of how to do it: Executive coach Jennifer Kahnweiler, PhD, points to an executive who wants to improve his networking skills and carefully decides which group he will network with. "He may want to demonstrate that his company is a good citizen. In that case, he might join the United Way and head up a campaign," explains Kahnweiler, author of *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength*. "That will connect him with the local players across the community and make networking a natural, strategic effort."

Saraf says restoring balance to the work/life equation is also an important task for this time of year. In addition, if an executive is contemplating a career change, he says that now is the time to visit a career coach to gain some guidance and strategize how to take those next steps.

Outlining Individual Goals

While your job search and networking goals are externally driven activities requiring your focus, internal goals related to your career also need attention during this time of year.

When determining the personal goals you want to achieve now, it's important to ensure that they align with the organizational goals you also want to reach. "Be clear on your purpose organizationally and where your individual contributions relate

to that purpose," says Bruce Rosenstein, author of *Living in More Than One World: How Peter Drucker's Wisdom Can Inspire and Transform Your Life*. "Make sure your goals and plans are aligned with those in the larger organization."

Rick Balsiger, president of Balsiger Partners LLC, an executive search, brand integration and organization design consultancy based in California, suggests accepting new assignments or volunteering to lead critical projects. "Particularly today, companies need leaders who are flexible, versatile and demonstrate the willingness to take on the tough assignments during tough times," he explains. "This can be a great way to further enhance our value to the organization."

To further enhance your value outside of your organization, Balsiger says it's an ideal time to continue to build and manage your personal brand. "Before the new year begins, take some time to assess what you bring to the table and how your strengths and experiences address different needs in the market," says executive coach Scott Eblin. "That's the beginning of understanding the essence of your personal brand and unique value proposition."

Identifying Organizational Goals

Completing organizational goals should also be part of your year-ending agenda. Experts say that among the most important areas needing focus are those that are employee- and/or customer-facing. Kahnweiler says executives must attend to goals related to employee retention and leadership development. "As we slowly move out of the recession, employees will be looking at jumping ship unless they see opportunities for growth and development in their own organization," she explains. "Senior leadership should take a close look at what kinds of goals and processes they have in place to develop and grow people."

Balsiger adds that executives should also spend these last weeks of the year communicating with employees and working to keep them involved and engaged with the organization. He notes that this is always beneficial, but more so during a challenging economy.

"Times like these are as difficult for remaining employees as they are for those who have been displaced, and morale can be extremely difficult to manage," says Balsiger. "Employees need to feel that they are a part of the solution, not viewed as overhead and part of the problem. And the fact is we need them to be part of the solution."

Pam Lassiter of Lassiter Consulting, a firm that provides career management services to both companies and individuals, agrees more focus needs to be placed on customers. This includes having a clear cut strategy related to how the recession is affecting clients and how your organization can help, she explains.

Make a Quick, Impressive Impact

"In the near-term, the focus should be on 'blocking and tackling' issues and execution," says Balsiger. "Major strategic initiatives should be reserved for the 2010 plan. There's most likely enough disruption, uncertainty, and in some cases, organizational paralysis already. Trying to introduce some last-minute goals or initiatives are not only nearly impossible to execute successfully, we risk confusing and paralyzing the organization even further."

Now is certainly the time to wrap-up unfinished projects and even kick-off smaller-scale initiatives that can conclude within a month's time. Leaders need to seek out the easiest and least time-sensitive goals to achieve right now, but ones that will still create a strong impact on organizational and individual success. "I believe that the goals you can focus on immediately should be the ones that will help executives, and perhaps other managers and staff, hit their targets for year's end," says sales strategist Michael Goldberg, of New Jersey-based Building Blocks Consulting, who consults with sales teams and business owners.

The goals that executives should focus on now should address both organizational (company) and individual (personal leadership) needs. "It should be a combination of both...how your personal goals are going to enhance organizational goals," says Borkin.

Continued on page 5

Final Goals

Continued from page 4

Finding Your Focus

Since there are so many goals still to be accomplished, both organizationally and individually, it can be difficult for executives to determine which need immediate attention, and which should be included among initiatives earmarked to begin in 2010. “An executive must look at both short-term and long-term priorities,” says Gayle Lantz, author of *Take the Bull by the Horns: The Busy Leader’s Action Guide to Growing Your Business...and Yourself*. “Ask: ‘What’s most important? What do we really want to accomplish?’ If unclear, revisit the organization’s vision and strategy.”

If you need help getting started as you determine your goals for the remainder of 2009 and all of 2010, Linda Dominguez, CEO and executive strategist at Executive Coaching and Resource Network Inc., suggests implementing the “Dominate and Delegate” process. The first step, explains Dominguez, is to take a piece of paper and draw a vertical line in the center of the page. Then, on the left side, list everything you want, need or plan to do by the end of 2009 — from strategic to tactical. Next, move items that only you can do to the right side of the page. Then, prioritize each item on the right side — what must be done and by when.

The goals focused on now need to be the most important and most pressing for the moment. “The goals that deserve the most attention are those that allow you to keep your business going,” says Saraf. “So if revenues are down and profits are suffering this year, it is time to do some end-runs to achieve those goals to the best of your abilities. If your actions now will better position the business in the coming year, it is time to focus on those so that as the new year approaches, you are better positioned to move forward in earnest.”

Tackling Your Least Favorite Goals

Whether it’s an aversion to a particular task, procrastination, or you just don’t

Expert Resources:

- Rick Balsiger, Balsiger Partners LLC (BalsigerPartners.com)
- Andy Borkin, Strategic Advancement Inc. (sai-hr.com)
- Linda Dominguez, Executive Coaching and Resource Network Inc. (Executive-Coaching.com)
- Scott Eblin, The Eblin Group (EblinGroup.com)
- Michael Goldberg, Building Blocks Consulting (BuildingBlocksConsulting.com)
- Jennifer Kahnweiler, PhD (AboutYouInc.com)
- Gayle Lantz, WorkMatters Inc. (WorkMatters.com)
- Pam Lassiter, Lassiter Consulting (LassiterConsulting.com)
- Bruce Rosenstein (BruceRosenstein.com)
- Dilip Saraf, Career Transitions Unlimited (DilipSaraf.com; 7keys.org)

possess the skills necessary to successfully accomplish a goal, it’s crucial that you put any of these roadblocks aside to attain your year-end goals. “Regardless of your affinity to doing a particular task or completing a favorite goal, its importance to the success of your company must be well recognized,” says Saraf. “If there is a good correlation between completing the task/goal and the future success of the company, then you must find avenues to completing that goal.”

Start small, if you can. Eblin suggests breaking your to-do list into discrete steps and selecting just one or two of the easiest ones to tackle immediately. “Find something to do that’s in that sweet spot between easy to do and likely to have an impact,” says Eblin, author of *The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success*. “Build some momentum for yourself by starting with the low hanging fruit.”

Saraf suggests delegating such tasks, hiring experts, asking others for help or even looking to others who have completed such tasks for inspiration. Balsiger advises executives to create a team that can help address those goals they are reluctant to work on. Another option, he notes, is to recruit a “partner” or co-sponsor who “allows us to tap into their knowledge base, creating additional shareholders for our task, while at the same time help to moderate some of our fear and reluctance.”

“You cannot afford to let your aversion to completing an important task get in the way of your company’s success,” adds Saraf. “That is selfish and self-defeating. Besides, conquering something new by overcoming your aversion

to a task that is abhorrent to you, but which must be done as a part of your duty, is inherently rewarding.”

Looking Ahead to 2010

Of course, now is the ideal time to look toward 2010 and determine the goals you want and need to accomplish in the new year. Just as executives must balance their remaining goals for 2009 between individual and organizational objectives, goals for next year need to be crafted in conjunction with the current year’s goals.

To help figure out where your focus should be next year, Goldberg suggests identifying the biggest challenges faced by your company in 2009. He stresses that executives should seek feedback about what those challenges are. “Improving efficiencies is always a good thing to look at, but a great approach would be to ask managers and staff what improvements they feel should or could be made,” Goldberg notes. “If you allow others to have ‘skin in the game,’ you’ll almost always be on track and have support executing goals.”

Also, ensure there is always a balance between short-term and long-term goals, recommends Lantz, who says it’s even more important for executives to double-check that they are focused on the right goals. “This is done when they keep an eye on the bigger strategy instead of getting lost in day-to-day activities,” says Lantz. “Larger strategic objectives typically stay more consistent. However, in this business environment, specific goals can and should change. Being flexible is key.” ■

Insider Insight

How to Effectively Motivate Your Team

By Stephen Balzac

Once upon a time there was a software company developing an innovative data management tool. When it started, everyone was excited about the product and eager to be part of such a novel project. Three years later, the software was on the market. Naturally, everyone was ecstatic and eager to buckle down and produce the next version.

Well, not exactly. Yes, the product was on the market; after that, the tale had an unhappy ending. Over time, all that energy and motivation steadily eroded, a result of poor planning, long hours, overly optimistic deadlines, interpersonal conflict, a bad habit of “motivating” by moving from crisis to crisis and other stressors.

Certainly the company could have done better at reducing or eliminating some of the stressors that eventually led to its failure. However, in any competitive industry, there will be factors that erode the motivation and job satisfaction of employees. Reducing them as much as possible is a good start, but it isn't enough. The company cannot control the economy, for example. Therefore, it's vital to actively increase motivation. There are several practices companies can employ:

Create a Vibrant Vision of the Future

Remind people why they became excited in the first place. Refresh and revise that vision as the project evolves, so that everyone always remembers what they are working to accomplish. Encourage employees to imagine success; daydreaming is a powerful way for people to stay in touch with their — and the company's — long-term goals. Microsoft lost its way only after it changed its famed vision of a “PC on every desk and in every house.”

Become a Major Motivator

Managers need to act as coaches and cheerleaders, helping employees maintain focus and remain upbeat even when

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Encourage employees to imagine success; daydreaming is a powerful way for people to stay in touch with their — and the company's — long-term goals.

”

things are going poorly. Managers must help the employee build confidence, establish routines, and set realistic, difficult goals. They need to remind employees of past successes, not past failures. The latter only decreases motivation and confidence. If managers do not already have the necessary skills, the business needs to see to it that they acquire them. Managers who are glorified individual contributors will not be able to fill this role, and the entire team will suffer as a result.

Look Outside the Company

Encourage employees to join professional associations and network with their peers. Online social networks are a good start, but face-to-face interaction is valuable as well. Make it possible for employees to meet with customers and hear from them how they will benefit from the company's product or service. It's easy to become discouraged when working for a faceless “other.” It's easier to become excited when the person you are helping has a face. Finally, encourage employees to attend industry trade shows and conferences; sure, it may take them out of the office for a few days, but it also helps them keep tabs on their field and expand their knowledge.

A Family Focus

Putting a picture of a spouse, kids, family or close friend on their desk is another powerful motivator for many people.

Research shows that such a picture motivates people to work harder and more persistently at accomplishing their goals.

Reduce the Unpleasantness

Don't allow unpleasant tasks to fill the day. No matter how enjoyable the job, some of the work is really not much fun. If the unpleasant parts fill the day, motivation swiftly declines. Instead, allocate a chunk of time each day to performing unpleasant tasks: when you promise yourself you'll work on something for “an hour,” you're more likely to continue well past that than if you leave the time open-ended.

Take Breaks

Although this may sound counter-intuitive, stepping away from your work is one of the most powerful means of making progress. An hour break to go to the gym can yield greater progress in solving a problem than eight hours spent banging one's head against the wall. People who take vacations experience significantly less burnout than those who do not.

Promote Outside Activities

Encourage employees to take hobbies seriously. Strange as this may sound, people who are devoted to a hobby or sport are more productive, not less. Knowing practice is at 7pm means there is greater motivation to finish work on time. Leaving time for practice, whether or not the work gets done, actually increases motivation to do more the next day. It's when there is nothing else on the schedule that work expands to overflow the time available.

As the saying goes, success is a marathon, not a sprint. Keeping motivation alive and well is key to crossing that finish line. ■

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead, an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses increase revenue and build their client base. Balzac can be reached at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com

Your Career Advisor

Assessing Risk Along the Career Path

By Rick Smith

Unemployment rates are high and growing, but that doesn't mean you have to settle for a job or a career path that is not right for you. Even in this market, making positive changes to your career is possible, and necessary.

The fact is, you don't *have* to be fearless to make significant, positive changes in your career and your life. Transformative change isn't propelled by raw courage. It's "sparked" by a series of events that build exposure and experience, both of which help to create asymmetric risk — tipping the scales in your favor. Through sparking, the upside opportunity is confirmed while downside risk is mitigated. Ultimately, a career leap — when it comes — is not one of faith, but of experience, even one of comfort.



Transformative change isn't propelled by raw courage. It's 'sparked' by a series of events that build exposure and experience, both of which help to create asymmetric risk — tipping the scales in your favor.



Making the right decisions in your career is about knowing *before* you choose; it's about making certain the risk-return equation is leaning heavily in your favor. One of the ways you do that is by breaking down risk into its component parts and considering each one separately:

- **Passion risk:** Will you love the new work?
- **Competency risk:** Will you be good at it?
- **Opportunity risk:** Is anyone out there interested in what you have to offer?

- **Life-change risk:** Will you be better off once you've jumped into your new life and can't turn back?

If considered holistically, these risks can seem paralyzing. To shake off that paralysis, you need a way to test the changes you have in mind — safely. That's where the "Spark Sequence" comes in.

The Spark Sequence

The Spark Sequence is a process of taking low-danger, exploratory steps in order to gain exposure to new types of work and alternative paths for your career. By activating the Spark Sequence, you gain insights and confidence while managing the risks associated with career change.

The Spark Sequence consists of three steps:

Educate yourself about the kinds of work that would evoke your strengths and passions. Read all you can about that work. Find someone familiar with that work who could mentor you and explain the ins and outs of the work. Ask!

Experiment with the work activities that interest you. For example, suppose you're interested in project management. You like to organize things, and you think (based on other life experiences) that you could be great at it. The next time you're involved in a project at work (pick a not-so-important one), take on some project management tasks — such as developing a schedule. Build exposure from there.

Experience the types of work that interest you. For instance, let's say you are creative, and believe you would excel at developing new products or services. To gain valuable experience (and information about yourself), pitch in with a local community organization that's looking for new ways to serve its constituencies. You can't just dream about it. Ultimately, you have to experience it directly to know if it is the right direction for you.

Moving Forward

Sparking lets us answer the questions that

hold us back. Answering those questions enables us to believe. Once we believe, we can act. And — the miracle of the whole process — once we act, so many of our fears and perceived risks fall right away.



Making the right decisions in your career is about knowing *before* you choose; it's about making certain the risk-return equation is leaning heavily in your favor.



Moving toward your ideal job doesn't require crashing through brick walls. It's not an all-or-nothing jump to something new. Rather, it's a matter of simultaneously building information and experience and of using mentoring, modeling, volunteering, and perhaps part-time work to educate yourself and to build exposure to whatever you are pointing toward.

Take a moment now to identify work activities that draw on your strengths and passions. Start learning about, experimenting with and experiencing those activities today. You'll gain crucial insights, skills and confidence that you're heading in the right direction, and you'll keep your career moving forward, even in a job market that is less than ideal. ■

Rick Smith is the bestselling author of The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great and is co-author of The Wall Street Journal and BusinessWeek bestseller The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers. He is also the founder of World 50, an executive networking company. He can be contacted at LeapBuilder.com

Books Worth Your Time Continued from page 3

Aside from this reactive job search strategy, I typically tell people to concentrate on a “people search” instead of a job search, which proves to be much more effective. Most of executive networking is a transaction through people, instead of job boards and corporate websites. When was the last time you found a candidate for a senior-level position on Monster.com? Exactly! If you’re a recruiter, you’re tapping your trusted network for referrals before you even promote the job online. This is the easiest and most cost effective way for companies to hire and the reason why now is the time to use social media to connect directly with employers that you actually want to work for. The Internet has made people accessible like never before, and it poses great opportunities for you to position yourself for the career of your dreams, not just one to pay the bills. Use Google, Technorati and social network search engines to find people who work at companies you want to work for and who are in positions you find interesting and spend as much time as humanly possible to become friendly with them. You’d be amazed by the results you’ll get!

Q. How do you recommend executives maintain consistency between their online and offline presence?

A. Not all executives should maintain a blog or have a presence on social networks. Depending on their current situation, which includes their family, career and

time constraints, it may be a good idea for some and not for others. A blog takes a great deal of commitment. It’s like having a child that you have to take care of. If you won’t make the time to write posts multiple times per week, a blog can hurt your reputation rather than build it. The one main social network you have to join is LinkedIn because most of your executive peers are there, and executive recruiters are conducting searches for new talent.

If you work for a different company now than you did years ago and your online presence showcases your prior work, then you should focus on getting more press for your current position. You can do this by telling your CEO your situation and asking to be a corporate spokesperson.

Q. Our ExecuNet “digital dirt” research revealed that the majority of recruiters look for additional information about candidates online, and as a result, 44 percent have eliminated someone from employment consideration. What steps should be taken to correct negative views of one’s brand?

A. Here is what you need to do:

- **Domain name:** You should claim your domain name right now. Then put up at least one web page that people can access from this domain so it becomes “crawlable” in various search engines. I recommend taking your résumé, splicing it into different sections, such as “education” and “major projects,” and then having one page that talks about each.
- **Social profiles:** Social networks have

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very high Google PageRanks (Facebook = 9, LinkedIn = 8, Twitter = 9), which means that once you create a profile, give it a unique URL and establish it; it will more than likely rank high for your name in search engines.

- **Content:** The best content you can create is in the form of a blog because it’s refreshed a lot (if you put work into it) and therefore ranks high and is shared more. You can also upload videos to sharing sites like YouTube or Vimeo and write for other blogs and/or news sites.
- **Press:** When a publication or blog writes something positive about you, especially if your name is in the title of the story, it can rank high as well, and give you traffic and credibility with that audience. ■

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